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THE FOLKLORE OF LIBERAL EDUCATION

FRANCIS H. HORN
PRESIDENT, PRATT INSTITUTE

THESE remarks are concerned with one of the oldest and just now one of the bitterest of educational controversies—that concerning the relationship of liberal education to education variously described as vocational, professional, specialized or practical.

I have entitled this discussion "The Folklore of Liberal Education." *Folklore* is defined as "traditional . . . beliefs . . . preserved unreflectedly among people." I shall not attempt to define *liberal education;* the term has long been debated, and my concept of liberal education should become clear as I proceed.

I hope to show that the current attacks on vocational education are based upon illusions or misconceptions concerning "liberal education" that justify the word "folklore." I shall use the term "vocational education" in its broadest sense, denoting that education, regardless of its level, which prepares the student for a specific occupation.

At the outset, let me stress the fact that I am the product of a liberal arts college, did most of my graduate work in English literature, taught English for ten years and history for five, and in school or college studied almost all the traditional liberal arts subjects.

Let me also make it clear that I believe in liberal education and am convinced that never before in history has the world been in greater need of those qualities of mind and spirit which it should provide.

My quarrel with the spokesmen for liberal education results from their misrepresentation or misunderstanding of the history of higher education and of the true nature of liberal education, their unsubstantiated claims for it, their bitter and unjustified attacks upon vocational education, and finally, their seeming blindness to the fact that our society, if it is to survive at all, needs both liberal and vocational education.

NOTE: Address delivered by Dr. Horn upon his inauguration as president of Pratt Institute, Brooklyn, N. Y., May 15, 1954.

The problem for college faculties and administrations is to find the right relationship between the two, a relationship which will vary with different institutions and for different students. The great strength of American higher education, in contrast to higher education elsewhere in the world, is its diversity—in objectives, in program, in institutional organization. This diversity must be preserved in spite of the insistence of the liberal arts people upon their special pattern of higher education to the exclusion of other patterns.

Let me now cite statements that point up this unhappy controversy between liberal and vocational education. Almost any pronouncement of any liberal arts college president in the last 50 years would do. But I shall use recent statements of two university presidents.

Although he is no longer at the head of the University of Chicago, Hutchins remains perhaps the loudest of the anti-vocationalists. In his two latest books, he laments "the collapse of liberal education in the United States" in the face of "an infinite, incoherent proliferation of courses largely vocational in aim."

President Griswold of Yale a year ago deplored "the decline of the liberal arts as a force in our national educational system." "These studies," he declared, "are disappearing under a layer of vocational and other substitutes like the landscape in the ice age. Both schools and colleges are denying themselves the benefits of studies which, for 2000 years, throughout Western civilization, have been esteemed as the key to the good life as well as to all true academic achievement."

This latter statement is an excellent example of "the folklore of liberal education." It is typical of the misconceptions commonly held by the liberal arts advocates. Let me discuss them more specifically.

The anti-vocationalists fail to understand, or do not want to understand, the history of higher education and the true nature of the liberal arts. Former President Coffman of the University of Minnesota summed these up when he wrote: "The 'liberal' studies of each age have been the practical studies of that age." In the classical period, the education projected for Plato's philosopher-king was practical in the highest sense.

Aristotle's concept, it must be admitted, was unalterably op-

posed to the practical. But to Aristotle, who regarded all paid employment as degrading, liberal education was the education suitable for a leisure class, for free men in contrast to slaves. Though it forms the basis for the views of many a liberal arts advocate today, his aristocratic concept is singularly inappropriate for a democratic society in which every man works and every man enjoys some leisure.

The Romans, unlike Aristotle, did not reject useful knowledge. Both Cicero and Quintilian stressed oratory not as a cultural adornment, but as a means to success in one's profession. Cicero's "good man and able speaker" was to study "every branch of useful knowledge." Later St. Augustine justified studying the liberal arts "partly for practical purposes, partly for knowledge."

The medieval universities were vocational schools, established because the monastic and cathedral schools of the time were not providing the trained doctors, lawyers, theologians and administrators needed by society. The cathedral schools, as a matter of fact, were the liberal arts colleges of their day. The universities arose in opposition to their narrow curriculum of the seven liberal arts.

Essentially the university was merely a guild of teachers which "provided and regulated the training of professional workers and vouched for the quality of the finished product," differing "little in philosophy or procedure from a guild of silversmiths or woodcarvers." Rashdall, whose *Universities of Europe During the Middle Ages* is the standard work of scholarship on the subject, wrote: "The rapid multiplication of universities during the 14th and 15th centuries was largely due to a direct demand for highly educated lawyers and administrators. In a sense the academic discipline of the Middle Ages was too practical . . . most of what we understand by 'culture,' much of what Aristotle understood by 'noble use of leisure,' was unappreciated by the medieval intellect."

The colonial colleges in America, the progenitors of our liberal arts colleges, were equally vocational in aim. Harvard College was founded to provide the new colony with a learned clergy, who were, of course, also the teachers of the time. A similar purpose was behind the establishment of most of our earlier col-

leges: college education in America has always had a vocational function since from the beginning students have gone to college to get training for specific occupations.

Examination of the history of higher education reveals another aspect of the folklore of liberal education. This history, President Griswold's reference to studies "esteemed for two thousand years" notwithstanding, is that of a changing, not a fixed, curriculum.

Father John Wise, in his scholarly treatise, *The Nature of the Liberal Arts,* writes: "Any particular enumeration, such as the number *seven,* is of no particular importance in the study of the liberal arts, for the classification and listing of the liberal arts changes with changing history, and trivium and quadrivium vary in particulars of content, purpose and method."

I would remind you, for example, that Greek language and literature, the heart of the liberal tradition in early American colleges, came into the university curriculum with the Renaissance; that modern languages and literature, including English literature, became part of the curriculum only in the 19th century; that the physical sciences were so unacceptable to the traditional colleges a century ago that separate schools had to be established at Yale, Harvard and Dartmouth in order to provide instruction in the sciences; that the social sciences—economics, political science, sociology, anthropology and social psychology—were not accepted into the curriculum until still later.

Most of what constitutes a liberal education today was unknown three hundred years ago, when Harvard College was founded, let alone two thousand years ago. Each accretion to the liberal arts curriculum has had to fight for acceptance against the bitterest opposition. The objection today to vocational courses—to business, journalism, education, for example—was paralleled yesterday by objection to the study of Greek, chemistry and international relations. There are no studies which throughout the history of Western civilization have always been esteemed the key to "all true academic achievement."

It is this misconception about the fixed nature of a liberal education which has led to another item in the folklore—the identification of certain content or subject matter with a liberal education. President Chalmers of Kenyon College, one of the

ablest spokesmen for liberal education, declared recently that it "consists of history, mathematics, biology, languages, literature, philosophy and religion."

A liberal education is no such thing. Such studies, properly taught and understandingly learned, should contribute to a liberal education. But a liberal education is primarily a way of looking at things, an education that frees the mind, that, as Cardinal Newman wrote, "gives a man a clear, conscious view of his own opinions and judgments . . .," and "teaches him to see things as they are. . . ."

The so-called liberal education of the past, however, to which our sentimentalists wish to return, was anything but liberal in this sense. The instruction in the early American colleges "was not designed to free the mind, but to discipline and channel it. The emphasis was never on free inquiry, but always on orthodoxy." A century ago, the situation was little better. The study of classics was recitation by rote. Andrew White, Cornell's first president who graduated from Yale in 1853, complained that in his whole course, not a single lecture had been given on literature, ancient or modern. In our own time, many of the "liberal" subjects have been taught as vocational courses, oriented largely toward students expecting to teach them.

The fact is that no subject, of itself, is liberal. It is not *what* the student studies that gives him a liberal education, but *how* he studies it, and the way it is taught. Just as the so-called liberal subjects can be taught illiberally, likewise so-called vocational subjects can and should be taught liberally. A student can be taught to think in courses in architecture and industrial design as well as in logic. President Hancher of State University of Iowa has stated that "Engineering drawing can be taught with deadly dullness or it can be taught so that it will open the windows of the mind." All teaching, no matter what the subject matter, should open such windows.

It is time, I believe, for the liberal arts people to speak more modestly of their type of education and less disparagingly of vocational education. Only a person oblivious to the facts of modern life would doubt the need of vocational education today. Specialization, which is just as much vocational education when it is designed to produce a nuclear physicist as it is when de-

signed to produce a pharmacist or dietitian, is the key not only to our material and technological progress, but also to our survival in a divided world. While specialized knowledge may not be enough for ultimate survival, there is indeed no hope without it. The future demands more, not less, of such education.

It is in their failure to present in proper perspective the major dilemma of higher education in our day that the liberal arts people are perhaps most guilty. The dilemma is this: how can the colleges and universities provide graduates prepared for the thousands of specialized tasks which must be carried on in our technological civilization and at the same time also prepared for the demanding responsibilities of intelligent and informed citizenship in our democratic society?

The liberal arts people have an answer, but it is not realistic; it is to provide a liberal education for all college students first, after which the graduate may acquire his vocational preparation. Even if this were desirable, and I have doubts that such separation is always desirable, it simply is not feasible in our society unless a college education is to be restricted to an intellectual and economic elite. This is hardly in keeping with our democratic traditions.

The liberal arts colleges do send their graduates in increasing numbers on to professional or graduate work, which is good for the nation and good for the individual. But all of our young people cannot afford the time or the money to spend five, six, seven or more years at their formal education. The liberal arts people display bad grace, therefore, in berating vocationalism in education, just because some, indeed most, of our young people must prepare for a definite occupation in two or four undergraduate college years. It is time that they stopped lamenting the decline of liberal education and recognized that the problem is not liberal education *versus* vocational education, but liberal education *and* vocational education.

The solution to the problem is to provide, in the time the student can give to his formal studies, as much liberal education as possible, while providing the vocational education he must have if he is to make his maximum contribution to society. Instead of deploring vocationalism, liberal arts people should rejoice at what has happened here in America. They should be

grateful that accountants, dress designers, horticulturists, advertising men, et cetera, and not just the preachers, teachers, doctors and lawyers are subject to the liberalizing influence of the colleges and universities.

Properly understood and interpreted, the liberal arts are not in jeopardy in America today. After the tremendous expansion of vocational education in the colleges in response to the genuine needs of our time, there is recognition of the essential place in the liberal arts as part of the education of every student, in connection with and not apart from preparation for his life-work. It is time to recognize the folklore for what it is, and to reassess the role and importance of liberal education in the light of its true traditions and the needs of our time.

The opportunity for genuine liberal education was never greater; the challenge will not be met, however, unless the liberal arts people and the vocational education people stop sniping at each other and get together to discover how, by cooperating, they can provide an integrated college education that results in the necessary vocational competence and at the same time in the habits of mind, the breadth of interests and the enlargement of spirit which are the marks of a true liberal education.